



Aspects of Support for Learning

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Everyone needs support to learn and achieve. However, individuals on the autism spectrum may require more support than the rest of us. Their disability greatly impacts their ability to understand their environment including physical space, activities, or people and interactions. It is up to those who provide support to truly look at various aspects of what that support may mean. It is not as simple as it sounds.

Based on lectures by Anne Donnellan and Martha Leary, (1998, French Lick, Indiana) aspects of support for learning include:

- Relationship
- Context
- Predictable
- Adjusted
- Augmented

The first order of business to true support is building a **relationship** with the individual with a disability to inspire confidence and trust. Unfortunately, there is no real formula to assist in creating a relationship. It is up to the individuals involved, working together, to figure it out. Since, in this instance, one person has an autism spectrum disorder, it would depend upon the support person to do the initial building. As in all relationships, it takes an honest and real interest in the other individual to begin to take steps to forming and maintaining the relationship.

Adopting an attitude of 'you're okay, let's work together' is the beginning step. If support persons realize that the challenges faced by individuals with ASD are due to their disability (e.g., sensory, communication, social issues) and that they are not always in control of their bodies and responses, it can reduce some of the pressures and challenges. A basic overview of autism will assist the support person to begin to grasp all of the challenges; however, each individual with ASD may experience the challenges in different ways and to different degrees. Therefore, care must be taken with broad generalizations. Truly getting to know the individual is vital. Life is about relationships, opportunities, experiences, and supports.

Context is crucial for all development and teaching. We are truly a composite of our environment. The physical space, the activities, and the types of interactions that happen all create an 'environment.' That environment can either be comfortable and conducive to learning or uncomfortable and a place that creates challenges for the individual. An environment that is too noisy, bright, or over stimulating may be detrimental to one student and not bother another; or an environment that is too quiet or lacks activity may cause another student to create some noise or 'excitement.' Each individual is different and generalizations should not be stated.

The physical environment or physical space must be considered when establishing a learning environment or safe place. What is the size of the room and how is the furniture arranged? Are there clear work places or seats for the students with ASD? Is it helpful for them to have a specified desk or seat that remains consistent? Is it best for some to be closer to the front of the room in order to be closer to the instruction, the board, maps, or other means of teaching? If they are seated in the back, are they more apt to become disengaged? Environments must be organized and clearly arranged for the student and the support person. If the environment changes, it can change

the ability to think and learn for students who truly rely on sameness. Realize that most everyone has arranged their living or work space to support their habits and if that space is altered without input, it can cause challenges that may seem minor to an onlooker but feel monumental to the one involved. This is definitely true for individuals with ASD.

Another aspect of each environment is geared toward the sensory system challenges for students with ASD. What type of lighting is used? Sometimes fluorescent lighting can emit a very high pitched sound that can be very disturbing to some individuals. In other situations, the lights may be too bright for their sensitive eyes. What sounds are happening in the room? Do all the students talk at once? Does the heating or air conditioning system create a great deal of noise or does it suddenly turn on and bang on the pipes? In the gym or cafeteria, sounds are amplified due to the space and lack acoustics. What other sensory issues might transpire in any environment? Think about those who are tactilely defensive and may have to stand or sit very close to another student. They may benefit from being at the end or front of a line, or seated behind or in front of the other students. Sensory issues can be hard to understand since they are very individual and basically 'invisible' to those who do not experience the challenges. Unless the student with ASD can tell us what is wrong, support staff or parents will need to look at all aspects of the environment as they begin to unravel challenging situations.

Predictability within environments, materials, and people is something most of us prefer, but something that people with ASD need in order to thrive in school or at home. Predictability helps everyone in all settings. The more predictable the situation, the easier it is not only for individuals with ASD, but for all of us.

Creating consistent routines both at home and at school are the beginning of establishing 'rules' that support learning. The routine can be further supported by creating a visual listing of the day's events, like a daily calendar that most adults refer to regularly. All students with ASD benefit and rely on those daily visual 'calendars.' Just because an individual with ASD seems to be doing 'fine' does not mean the visual calendar should not be used. It should always be available just as calendars, lists, or lesson plans are always available to adults providing support.

Rules, boundaries, and limits could be posted and stated as needed in the school setting as well as at home. If the rule is to eat one bite of every food on the plate before any dessert, this should be stated at the beginning of each meal and be visually posted on a wall. Ideally, this should also be the rule for everyone and not just for the individual with ASD. If people are to raise their hand to talk within the classroom, a visual to remind students could be posted on the wall as well. Care should be taken so there are not so many rules that the walls become covered. Be positive when stating rules such as 'hands to oneself,' or "walk when in the halls." This tells the individuals what is acceptable and what they can do. It is important to be clear, precise, and consistent. For activities that may be challenging, limits can help a student endure. By telling a student, "you should finish the first five problems on this page and then you can take a break," it lets them know there is an ending point for the activity. Simply being told, 'do your math until I tell you it is time to stop' may seem overwhelming to some students with ASD who may have a hard time sitting still or working long periods of time.

All of us rely on routines. Routines provide for a sense of stability in our lives. Should changes occur in our daily routine, we accept those changes much more readily when we know in advance that change is coming. It is no different for persons with ASD. For example, if a child's teacher has a planned absence from the classroom, or if Mom will be home late, the individual with autism should be informed ahead of time to decrease their discomfort. Change is often magnified in persons with ASD and they have a harder time understanding that things will indeed, return to 'routine' and normal. The key is to help them feel comfortable so they are able to learn.

Adjusted means to modify, tailor, or have something 'made to order.' When thinking about students with autism, adjustments may be needed to support their learning. This adjustment can be to their environment where the learning takes place, how instructions are given, how responses are given, how much time the student is allowed to respond in class, etc. Each individual with ASD is unique and may need these adaptations or adjustments to ensure

their best performance or to learn a new skill.

There are numerous adjustments that can be made to support learning. Below are some suggestions:

- Slow down the pace of the lecture or allow time to generate an answer;
- Allow students to write their answers instead of speaking;
- Allow writing with markers instead of pens or pencils which require different pressure;
- Create a seating arrangement that limits the amount of sensory input for the student, perhaps using a cubbie with a desk to alleviate noise and distractions;
- Give the student warning before calling on him or her to answer in class;
- Limit the number of words, problems, or paragraphs they have to work on. Instead of 25 problems, assign them 10 or 15 depending on their abilities;
- Some students may need to be tapped on the shoulder to get up from their seats due to movement difference challenges instead of just being directed to move;
- Visual supports should be used to tailor their daily schedule and routine; and
- Don't hover; allow them some space.

Adaptations can be generalized somewhat, but each individual with ASD may have highly individualized adapted needs. Once again, getting to know the person is very helpful.

Augmented, improved, supplemented, or enhanced systems may be needed in many areas but most importantly for communication. Augmentative or enhanced communication is one way to help students with ASD, even those who speak, have a way to let people know what they feel or need. Even those who speak, like the rest of us, may have a hard time finding the words they want when they are stressed or anxious. An augmentative system would be useful for them in those situations too. There are a variety of systems or tools available for communication. Sometimes the routines or rituals around certain activities such as meal time can help support the language and communication used. Those routines become consistent and the language used can become standard procedure during those times.

Augmenting any social interaction the individual may have with peers would also be helpful. To improve the interaction skills of the child with autism, any adult can become a facilitator or bridge builder between that child and a peer. By creating games, play, or work situations that involve the interest areas of the children, the adult can support the interaction of the participants. Enhancing the social interaction of individuals with ASD may be the second most important area, after communication, to improve. With improved and enhanced communication and social skills, individuals with ASD may have an easier time fitting into their school and neighborhood communities.

There is much to be done to support these individuals in their learning. Perhaps we should first consider that quite often they are doing the best they can. Our support should not criticize, but offer support to find alternatives, provide less stress, and supply more functional and meaningful (to them) activities.

References

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